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COMMUNICATION

THE TEST OF THE MINNESOTA PRIMARY ELECTION SYSTEM

If we may believe a few deep thinkers and a host of superficial ones, the present trend of thought is away from the old faith in democracy, which characterized the political thinking of the last century. Some few do not hesitate to pronounce the democratic movement of the nineteenth century wrong in principle and a failure in practice. Others less extreme express grave doubts as to its value. They believe that democracy has not done and cannot do a tithe of what its early champions claimed for it. At the same time they suggest that already the principle has been applied as far or even farther than is desirable. Yet, as if to make light of these pessimistic thinkers, there is at present in the United States a strong tendency to put into operation various political devices that once generally adopted, will extend the sway of democracy far beyond anything hitherto known in any of the large democracies of the world. Of these devices the two that appear to find the greatest favor in the United States are the referendum and the primary election. Within a few months the city of Chicago and the State of Washington have experimented with the referendum or taken steps to do so. In Minnesota, on September 16, the primary election system received a trial in a constituency sufficiently large, widely extended, and socially diversified to furnish a real test of the system. It is the purpose of this article to present in concise form an analysis of the latter experiment, seeking to indicate exactly what the test has shown upon the various points that must be considered in deciding whether the system is a failure or a success.¹

In 1899 the Minnesota legislature decided to test the primary election system. The experiment was tried in the largest county in the state, Hennepin. The passage of the law was not due to any very general and insistent demand even in Hennepin County. The old caucus and convention system had not been marked there by any abuses more flagrant than elsewhere, while the attendance upon the caucuses of the dominant political party had been higher than the average of similar communities in other parts of the country. The law was enacted principally because an able, progressive and energetic member of the Hennepin County delegation persuaded his colleagues of the delegation to favor the measure and then the legislature accepted it as measures of a local character are commonly accepted by legislative bodies.

¹This study is based upon: (1) Official election returns; (2) personal knowledge, particularly for Hennepin County and the city of Minneapolis; (3) the post-election issues of about 125 different newspapers. There are about 650 newspapers published in the state. Excluding religious, industrial and fraternal newspapers this is about 25 per cent of the newspapers. Practically all of the dailies have been used.

Under this law Hennepin County tried the system in 1900.² Upon the whole the trial was favorable to the system. It brought to the polls 89.2 per cent of the voters, who subsequently voted at the general election. The quality of the nominees in general was much superior to previous selections; particularly was this true of the aldermanic candidates. Public opinion was nearly unanimous in favor of the system. All the newspapers pronounced it a success and no man of prominence took a firm stand against it. The general opinion was that the one bad result was an accident, liable to occur under any method and not fairly chargeable to the system alone.

The law under which the recent test was made was enacted by the legislature at a session beginning a few weeks after the test in Hennepin County. That success was the chief argument for and the principal reason of its passage. The public demand for such a law was only fairly strong, not irresistible. It was not based upon a strong desire to get relief from intolerable abuses, but upon the ground that Hennepin County had a more perfect system and that the remainder of the state was entitled to the same privilege. There was considerable opposition to the measure in the legislature and it had to be amended by leaving out the state officials before its passage could be secured. This opposition was not to any considerable extent along party or locality lines, but appears to have been due to temperamental causes and real or fancied personal interest.

In brief, the chief provisions of the law are as follows.³ At least twenty days before the primary election persons who desire to become candidates for party nomination must file affidavits and pay small fees to the county auditor if the constituency lies wholly within one county. The Secretary of State acts in place of the auditor for larger constituencies. The affidavits must state among other things that the candidate is a qualified voter and that he belongs to the political party whose nomination he seeks.⁴ This done, the candidate's name is placed upon the ballot of his party. These ballots are prepared by the proper public officials in precisely the same manner as for a general election, except that there is one ballot for each political party. In the eyes of the law a political party is dead if it did not poll 10 per cent of the total vote at the preceding general election. If a party is excluded by the operation of this provision, it can obtain restoration by the presentation of a petition bearing the signatures of 10 per cent of the voters. The primary election occurs upon the first of the three general registration days, which is seven weeks before the general election. By registering for the general election, the voter becomes entitled to take part in the primary election. In general, the procedure differs from that of the regular election day, only in that the voter must ask for the ballot of

²See the *ANNALS* for September, 1902, pp. 145-146.

³General Laws of Minnesota, 1901, chapter 216.

⁴The law contains no definition of party membership for the purpose of candidacy. It has such a provision for voting purposes. In at least one case a candidate for a nomination found that he could not vote for himself, because for voting purposes he belonged to another political party.

the political party to which he belongs, and if his right to the ballot that he calls for is challenged, he must swear in his vote. A rule is provided to determine what constitutes party membership for voting purposes. The rule is that the voter belongs to the party "whose candidates he generally supported at the last general election, and with which party he proposes to affiliate at the' next general election." In other words, he must have once supported the party and intend to support it at the approaching election. After the primary election has determined the party nominations, independent candidates can be placed upon the ticket by petition of 5 per cent of the voters, but no person who was beaten at the primary election can become an independent candidate.

In forming a careful judgment upon the recent test of the system just outlined, the following points are of prime importance: the size and distribution of the vote; whether party nominations were actually made by members of the party; the quality of the men who offered themselves as candidates for party nominations; the quality of the successful candidates; the kind of methods employed in the campaign prior to the day of voting; the effect of the primary system upon party organization, methods, and subsequent success; the attitude of the people towards the system after its trial.

In size the vote did not correspond exactly to the expectations of either the friends or the foes of the system. In the general election of 1900 the vote of the state for Congressmen⁵ was 317,936. The corresponding vote at the recent primary election was 175,235, or 55.7 per cent of that polled at the preceding general election. The vote of the dominant party (Republican) was 78.8 per cent, while the Democratic vote was only 26.3 per cent. In the absence of statistics to show the number of votes commonly cast at the caucuses under the old system, it is not possible to determine how great an improvement this was in the size of the vote. In the city of Minneapolis, where attendance at the caucuses was probably far beyond the average of the state, the dominant (Republican) party seldom secured an attendance of over 35 per cent of its voters. The attendance at the Democratic caucuses was much less. The fact that the vote at the recent test was not larger disappointed enthusiastic supporters of the new system, since it was much smaller than three previous local trials had led them to anticipate. At Minneapolis in 1900 in the mayoralty contest, 89.2 per cent of the vote subsequently cast at the regular election was polled. At Duluth, in December last, in a municipal election the vote was 69.8 of that subsequently cast. In the St. Paul municipal election a little later an even better showing was made, when 94.6 per cent of the vote was cast at the primary election. Many reasons have been offered to explain why the vote at the recent trial was not larger. Of the many suggested, six certainly operated to keep down the vote. (1) Many members of the minority parties did not vote. (2) Lack of sharp competition kept down the vote in many localities. (3)

⁵The congressional vote is selected as the basis of comparison because it probably represents about the average of the votes and is the only one for which official figures are yet obtainable.

Large numbers of farmers could not or would not leave their work in order to vote. (4) The absence of great political excitement operated everywhere to reduce the attendance at the polls. (5) The novelty of the system accounts for the absence of many voters. (6) A serious objection on the part of the voters to one feature of the system kept many persons from taking part.

In the entire state the Democratic party cast only 26.3 per cent of the vote that it had polled at the previous general election, while the other minority parties secured only 4.2 per cent. These figures undoubtedly indicate that many members of the minority parties remained at home, although there was a special reason to account for the disappearance of much of the minority vote, as will presently be shown. A study of the Democratic vote by counties would make this still clearer. In several counties it was less than 10 per cent, the average being raised very much by quite large votes in a few counties. The occasion for this is to be found in the second and sixth of the reasons for the small size of the vote.

Lack of sharp competition for the nominations on the part of either of the two leading parties, it goes without saying, would much reduce the vote. The extent to which this actually operated may be seen in a table showing the distribution of the congressional vote by districts.

Congressional Vote by Districts

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Total vote at the primary election in 1902, compared with the vote at the general election in 1900	57.9	39.5	46.8	54.2	78.1	56.1	55.6	64.8	47.4
Republican vote similarly compared . .	88.5	63.2	60.3	58.7	92.8	74.4	89.1	94.0	86.7
Democratic vote similarly compared . .	19.0	17.5	29.6	46.4	65.8	35.9	— . 8	22.1	4.0

In the second district, it will be noted, the total vote is much below the state average of 55.7 per cent. There the Republican and Democratic tickets each had but one candidate for the congressional nomination. Every county in the district has a large Republican majority, and sharp contests for the county and legislative nominations enabled the Republicans to get out a fair vote, despite the lack of a congressional contest. The Democrats, however, with no prospect of electing any of their candidates, had no contests and consequently had a vote so small that it pulled down the percentage of the total vote in the district to the smallest in the state. Only two districts have total votes much above the state average. In one of these, the fifth, it will be observed that both parties considerably exceeded the state average for the total vote, as well as their respective party averages. This was due in

* No Democratic candidate in this district.

part to the fact that the district is mainly an urban community, but principally to keen competition for places upon both tickets. The fact that the Republican party has carried every congressional district in the state at every election since 1894 and has a majority of seventy-two out of the eighty-two counties made Democratic nominations little sought after. Lack of contests for Democratic nominations made the vote of that party small and contributed much to the smallness of the total. A comparison of the party votes by counties would show some wide variations even in the dominant party. Further investigation would show that in almost every case where the vote is particularly small it was due to the absence of a sharp local contest. A complete study of the counties would also show that in a surprisingly large number of them there was no particular contest on one or even both tickets. The state and district averages of both parties are due quite largely to high averages in a few counties. In Dodge County, to cite a single example, the Republican vote was 128.6 per cent of what it had been in the general election of 1900.

The size of the total vote was perhaps most seriously affected by failure of the farmers to vote in as large numbers as had been expected. At the present writing it is not possible to determine with accuracy the distribution of the vote between urban and rural districts, but there can be no doubt of the fact that the rural vote was small. Almost every country newspaper commented upon it, giving as the reason that the farmers were too busy to vote. The backwardness of the season, which had delayed their work, is largely responsible for this abstention. Naturally this absence from the polls on account of pressing farm labors was much greater in the northern than in the southern counties. The small vote in the ninth and in the northern portion of the seventh districts is to be explained in this way. Otter Tail County, the largest in the ninth district, cast only 22.1 per cent of its vote, although the fight for the Republican nomination was one of the fiercest in the state. A comparison of two county votes in the seventh district will show the operation of this cause still more clearly. Traverse County is upon the northern boundary of the district, Lyon County upon the southern. Lyon County cast 66.1 per cent of its vote, Traverse County only 36.6 per cent. The candidate who was generally picked as the probable winner had his chief strength in the northern end of the district. He stood third in the race.

It is very difficult to determine with any degree of certainty just how far the novelty of the system affected the vote. Opponents of the system have declared that the novelty of the system was favorable to a large vote, and have pointed to the fact that in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth, the vote at the second trial of the system was smaller than at the first trial. The matter does not admit of much proof. My own impression is that the novelty of the system diminished the vote. The country newspapers in large numbers, whether for or against the system, mention the novelty of it as one of the reasons why the rural vote was not larger. In the cities and villages more of the voters had been accustomed to attend the caucuses at

least occasionally and so were in the proper frame of mind to take up with the system promptly. In the country many of the voters had never concerned themselves about nominations until they were made; such voters could not be expected to make use of the system in as large numbers as may be expected later on.

One feature of the scheme, as provided for in the law, proved decidedly unpopular and did much to reduce the vote. Everywhere large numbers of voters objected to the provision requiring them to disclose their political affiliations. In some places quite a number registered for the general election, but refused to vote at the primary. The firemen in the city of Minneapolis very generally did so. Many voters undoubtedly remained away, knowing the requirement of the law. There is no one point about the operation of the scheme concerning which the newspapers so entirely agree. It may be said that it worked badly in communities where one party has a large majority. Members of the minority parties especially object to disclosing their politics. In the city of Minneapolis and to some extent elsewhere, it was announced that the campaign committees of both parties would have men at the polls to make a record of political affiliations. This announcement certainly kept many voters away from the polls.

In one respect the intention of the law was openly disregarded. The requirement that each voter must declare the party to which he belongs was intended to make certain that none but Republicans should be permitted to vote for Republican candidates, and none but Democrats for Democratic candidates. The proof that this was not actually secured is overwhelming. The smallness of the Democratic vote in the state would of itself argue that some Democrats had voted the Republican ticket. Republican newspapers in all parts of the state, except in Democratic counties, declare that many known Democrats were allowed to vote the Republican ticket; challenges were almost unknown, and the judges appear to have invariably permitted the voter to swear in his vote. The large vote which the Republicans cast in Dodge County has been already alluded to. Much of it was doubtless due to the fact that sharp competition for the nominations brought out an unusually large number of Republican voters. Where the rest came from may be discovered by comparing the Democratic vote at the primary with the preceding general election vote. At the primary the Democrats cast 27 votes; at the last general election they had cast 904 votes. In 1900 the town of Graceville was a Democratic stronghold. The Democrats had 177 votes, the Republicans 95. At the recent primary one Republican candidate there polled 201 votes, another 94, and a third 7. The Democratic ticket received but 6 votes. It is, of course, obvious that at least one and probably two Republican candidates were assisted by Democratic votes. In strongly Democratic counties precisely the opposite took place. Republicans preferred to sacrifice their opportunity to assist in the selection of the Republican nominee for Congress, in order that they might exercise a choice among the Democratic aspirants for county office. In Shakopee, located in a Democratic county, the lowest Republican vote in any ward at the 1900 election was 150. At

the recent primary election in two wards there was not a single Republican vote. The Republicans openly voted the Democratic ticket. As a rule, in all counties where one party had so large a majority that a county nomination was tantamount to an election, the members of the minority party quite generally voted the ticket of the majority party. In some places where the parties were more evenly divided it may be that members of the minority party voted the majority ticket in order to put weak candidates upon it. I do not think, however, that this was often done. I have only found two newspapers making the charge, and in neither case was there any specification of detail. The members of the minority party who voted the majority ticket seem to have done it because no objection was offered and they had been solicited to do so by aspirants for nomination.

In the long run the success or failure of the primary election system must depend largely upon the kind of men that it encourages to become candidates for nomination. Opponents of the system have argued that under it an inferior class of men will offer as candidates, since even a nomination cannot be secured except after that sort of campaigning which is often distasteful to men who would make excellent officials. Friends of the system have claimed that a better class of men will come forward as candidates, believing that the people will deal more justly with them than would conventions manipulated by politicians. The recent trial did not settle the question nor did it afford any very clear indication of the tendency. All sorts of men offered themselves as candidates. The opponent of the system who declared that few good men would come forward proved to be a false prophet. The champion of the system who predicted that unfit men would not consider it worth their while to become candidates was no more adept in prophecy. One of the amusing features of the campaign in Minneapolis was the earnest and aggressive efforts made by various eccentrics, who had no chance whatever of success and whose claims would never have received a moment's consideration from any political convention. So far as the test determined anything upon this point it seemed to show that good men will of their own motion come forward a little more freely than under the convention system, and that good men can be induced to offer themselves to the people quite as easily as to conventions. This apparently is due to confidence in the result of the people's judgment and because offers of personal support have a more tangible value than under the old system.

Naturally the most important question of all is, What kind of men actually receive the nominations? Here opinions will differ widely and a single test is not a sufficient criterion as to the effect of the system. Two things at least seem to be established with a reasonable degree of certainty. (1) A very large proportion of those already in office obtained renominations. Everywhere the newspapers commented that the system favored those in office. This seems to be particularly true of administrative offices. (2) In the small constituencies better nominations were made than under the old system. It would not be safe to affirm that there was no improvement in the large constituencies, but if there was any it was less noticeable. For a number of

reasons the value of the system in this particular when applied to large constituencies was not thoroughly tested. There was much, however, to suggest that if the system becomes a permanent institution its greatest improvement will be in bringing about the selection of a superior class of men for minor local offices.

Only four of the seven Congressmen from Minnesota were candidates for renomination; two of them were unopposed and the others triumphed over their rivals. All will agree that three out of the four are men of first-rate ability and have made excellent Congressmen, while many will make the same claim for the fourth. Of the five⁷ new nominees not as much can be said. One cannot feel altogether certain that any of them will rank up with the leading members of the delegation. For none of them could it fairly be claimed that he is clearly and indubitably the superior of all his rivals for the nomination.

The membership of the Minnesota legislature changes rapidly and it is exceedingly difficult for any but a very close observer to tell just what members serve their constituents well. One must form his judgment as to the primary election system and the legislature from a few cases. It would seem that nearly all the conspicuously able and faithful members who sought renomination were successful, while several at least of the flagrantly bad members were beaten. The quality of the new members cannot be determined in advance.

It is quite impossible for any one to know with much certainty the precise qualifications of the nominees upon the county tickets; only a very general notion can be obtained in regard to them from the comments of the newspapers, particularly the newspapers of the opposing political party. If these notices may be trusted, it is quite certain that the county tickets are far better than the average of previous years in point of integrity and ability.

Only in the city of Minneapolis was there a municipal election also. The result was much like that at the trial two years before; in part bad, but principally good. Candid Republicans quite generally admitted that none of the three candidates for the mayoralty nomination fairly represented the party. The least objectionable of them received the nomination by a large majority. On the Democratic ticket the better man and the best of all the aspirants for the mayoralty received the nomination by a small majority. The result of the aldermanic contests was particularly gratifying to all friends of good government. Eleven of the thirteen retiring aldermen were candidates for renomination. All who belonged decisively to the good government element were successful. The prospect as regards the new nominees is decidedly promising. Several who are certain of election will at once join the good government element.

In the matter of the methods which the general adoption of the primary election system would introduce into American political life the recent test was a clear indication. It lengthens materially the period during which politics is the all-absorbing topic. Quiet campaigning began more than a

⁷The reapportionment gives Minnesota two additional Congressmen

year before the election day and active public work started early in the summer. Whatever others may think, printers, lithographers, bill-posters, and the proprietors of halls and livery stables are likely to think well of the system for they reaped a rich harvest. Newspapers and theatre programs were filled with pictures and notices of candidates. In the cities at least nearly every telegraph and telephone pole was adorned with campaign placards. Where the constituencies were small and compact enough there was a great deal of house-to-house canvassing. The idea upon which most of the candidates proceeded was that the man who made his name best known to the voters would capture the nomination. It is now apparent that this idea was to a large extent fallacious. Extensive advertising and great personal activity in many cases produced ridiculously small results. The three things that seem to have counted most effectively were ability to produce a good personal impression, the extent and character of the candidate's reputation prior to the campaign, and the formation of a good organization of experienced political workers.

As most of contests were for local offices, it was not to be expected that questions of national importance would enter to any great extent. The only opportunity for such questions was in the congressional contests. In only two of the nine districts were these contests waged to any great extent upon such issues. But there national questions, such as tariff revision, reciprocity, Cuban relief, and the control of trusts, were thoroughly discussed and determined in large part the casting of the votes. In many of the contests, questions of nationality and locality cut a large figure. The frequency with which candidates appear to have had a large vote in one section and no support at all in another, shows that sectional lines were often sharply drawn. On the other hand, a host of items in the newspapers indicate that appeals to such prejudices were in many cases quite futile.

It will thus be seen that the methods of the primary election campaign were quite similar to the familiar methods of the general election campaign. Complaints of corrupt, unfair, or pernicious methods, while not wholly absent, were not numerous. It should be remembered, however, that even the cities of the state have comparatively little of the element that can be easily captured by such methods.

One of the objections most urged against the primary election system is that it will seriously interfere with party organization and will thus jeopardize party success. The recent trial did not give much opportunity for the framing of even a tentative opinion upon this subject. It did show, however, that two of the particular fears of those who urge this objection are to some extent well grounded. Political workers who go through one strenuous campaign are not likely to be immediately ready for another. The recent test showed that party workers would not stand to one side while the nominations were being made. They entered the primary election campaign most actively. Many of them will scarcely be able to give as much time as formerly to the regular election campaign. It is also hard to see how some of these workers can now do any effective service in behalf of some of the

men that they opposed so vehemently in the race for the nominations. The other objection is that evenly balanced tickets cannot be secured because proper attention cannot be given to such matters as nationality, locality and personal influence, and therefore that many weak tickets will be presented. A legislative district in Minneapolis furnishes a practical illustration. It consists of two wards, the larger Republican, the smaller Democratic. In order to win, the Republicans must keep all of the Republican voters of both wards in line. In the Democratic ward the Republican vote comes mainly from Scandinavians. By long-established custom the four places were equally divided between the wards. Conventions had no difficulty in arranging this, nor in seeing that the Scandinavians were properly represented upon the ticket. At both of the primary elections the Republican voters have paid no attention to the former custom, with the result that the Republicans living in the Democratic ward have been left without any representative upon the ticket. As they are also mainly of one nationality they resent the double omission. Two years ago the Republican ticket was successful in spite of considerable dissatisfaction; this year the dissatisfaction is more acute and the party managers in the district are much perturbed.

The precise attitude of the state toward the primary election system, now that it has been once tried, cannot be stated in a word. Opinion regarding it is certainly not unanimous. Many of the newspapers have not yet expressed any opinion. Of those that have committed themselves, it is evident in many cases that the opinion was hastily framed and wholly from local conditions. Doubtless there will be many changes of opinion shortly. Practically all of the newspapers in the large cities are heartily in favor of the system in principle and maintain that it is a thoroughly good one, and must not be cast off. The newspapers in the smaller cities take much the same attitude, but are less enthusiastic. The rural press furnishes a great variety of opinions. Some few denounce the system roundly and call for its repeal; a much greater number are somewhat indifferent, but rather inclined to favor the system if it can be satisfactorily altered in some particulars; the larger number pronounce the system excellent and desire its continuance though with some alterations. In this matter at least, the newspapers of the state probably reflect public opinion quite accurately. All agree that if the system is to continue it must be altered somewhat. Many features of the system are singled out for criticism. The three most common complaints are against the requirement that the voter must disclose his party affiliation, the failure of the system to prevent the voters of one party from assisting in the selection of another party's nominees, and the expense of the system to both candidates and taxpayers. Opinion is well-nigh unanimous in favor of making the primary election ballot as absolutely secret as the general election ballot. It is generally agreed that it would be much better if some way could be discovered of compelling the voters to act with the political party to which they really belong, but I have not found a single suggestion as to how this may be secured. To a surprising extent this feature of the system is looked upon as a necessary and tolerable evil. Complaints

upon the score of expense are not frequent, but when made are urged most insistently. Several suggestions have been made to secure secrecy for the ballot. From them it will be easy to select one that will work successfully. That done, it seems likely that the people of the state will regard the system with satisfaction.

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